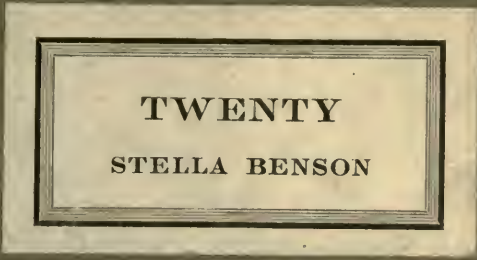


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TWENTY

STELLA BENSON



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TORONTO

# T W E N T Y

BY

STELLA BENSON

AUTHOR OF

"THIS IS THE END," "I POSE"

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1918

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## PREFACE

ALMOST all the verses in this book have appeared before, the majority of them included in two books, *I Pose* and *This is the End*. Messrs. Macmillan, who published these, have been kind in raising no objection to re-publication. I have also to thank the Editors of the *Athenæum*, *Everyman*, and the *Pall Mall Gazette* for allowing me to reprint verses.

The title of the book has no reference to the writer's age.

S. B.



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## CHRISTMAS, 1917

A KEY no thief can steal, no time can  
rust ;

A faery door, adventurous and  
golden ;

A palace, perfect to our eyes — Ah  
must

Our eyes be holden ?

Has the past died before this present  
sin ?

Has this most cruel age already  
stonèd

To martyrdom that magic Day, within  
Those halls, enthronèd ?

No. Through the dancing of the  
    young spring rain,  
Through the faint summer, and the  
    autumn's burning,  
Our still immortal Day has heard again  
Our steps returning.

## THE SECRET DAY

My yesterday has gone, has gone and  
left me tired,  
And now to-morrow comes and beats  
upon the door ;  
So I have built To-day, the day that  
I desired,  
Lest joy come not again, lest peace  
return no more,  
Lest comfort come no more.

So I have built To-day, a proud and  
perfect day,  
And I have built the towers of cliffs  
upon the sands ;  
The foxgloves and the gorse I planted  
on my way ;

The thyme, the velvet thyme, grew up  
beneath my hands,  
Grew pink beneath my hands.

So I have built To-day, more  
precious than a dream ;  
And I have painted peace upon the  
sky above ;  
And I have made immense and misty  
seas, that seem  
More kind to me than life, more fair  
to me than love —  
More beautiful than love.

And I have built a house — a house  
upon the brink  
Of high and twisted cliffs; the sea's  
low singing fills it ;  
And there my Secret Friend abides,  
and there I think  
I'll hide my heart away before to-  
morrow kills it —  
A cold to-morrow kills it.



THE SECRET DAY 13

Yes, I have built To-day, a wall against  
To-morrow,

So let To-morrow knock — I shall not  
be afraid,

For none shall give me death, and none  
shall give me sorrow,

And none shall spoil this darling day  
that I have made.

No storm shall stir my sea. No night  
but mine shall shade

This day that I have made.

## SONG

THERE is the track my feet have worn  
By which my fate may find me :  
From that dim place where I was born  
Those footprints run behind me.  
Uncertain was the trail I left,  
For — oh, the way was stormy ;  
But now this splendid sea has cleft  
My journey from before me.

Three things the sea shall never end,  
Three things shall mock its power :  
My singing soul, my Secret Friend,  
And this, my perfect hour.

And you shall seek me till you reach  
The tangled tide advancing,  
And you shall find upon the beach  
The traces of my dancing,  
And in the air the happy speech  
Of Secret Friends romancing.

## THE ORCHARD

I WILL repent me of my ways ;  
I will come here and bury  
Five thousand odd superfluous days  
Beneath a flow'ring cherry.

Between a pear and a cherry tree  
My temple I will enter —  
My place, where even I may be  
The altar and the centre.

One altar to a thousand aisles,  
A hundred thousand arches . . .  
The loud lamb-choir about me files,  
The bleating bishop marches,

The congregation kneels and nods,  
The bishop leads its praises,

So I'll pray too, to their dim gods  
Whose feet are decked with daisies :

*Ah, let me not grow old. Ah, let  
Me not grow old, and falter  
In my delusion, or forget  
My heart was once an altar.  
Let me still think myself a star  
With these my rays about me ;  
Pretend these green perspectives are  
All purposeless without me.*

*Ah, bid the sun stand still. Ah,  
bid  
The coming night retire,  
And all the good I ever did  
Shall feed your altar fire ;  
The hour shall stand and sing your  
praise,  
The minute shall adore you,  
And my ten thousand unborn  
days  
I'll sacrifice before you.*

*Gods of great joy, and little grief,  
See — I will wear as token  
A pear leaf and a cherry leaf  
Until this pledge be broken. . . .*

Between a pear and a cherry tree  
A cold hand touched my shoulder —  
*Ah, my false gods have forsaken  
me,  
I am a minute older.*

THANKS TO MY WORLD FOR  
THE LOAN OF A FAIR DAY

THAT day you wrought for me  
Shone, and was ended.  
Perfect your thought for me,  
Whom you befriended.  
Such joy was new to me —  
New, and most splendid,  
More than was due to me.  
More than was due to me.

Though I do wrong to you,  
Having no power,  
Singing no song to you,  
Bringing no flower,  
Yet does my youth again  
Thrill, for the hour  
Cometh in truth again.  
Cometh in truth again.

20 THANKS TO MY WORLD

I shall possess to-day  
All I have wanted,  
All I lacked yesterday  
Now shall be granted.  
No longer dumb to you,  
Changed and enchanted,  
Singing I'll come to you.  
Singing I'll come to you.

I will amass for you  
Very great treasure.  
Swift years shall pass for you  
Dancing for pleasure.  
Time shall be slave to me,  
Giving — full measure —  
All that you gave to me.  
All that you gave to me.



## SONG

IF I have dared to surrender some imi-  
tation of splendour,  
Something I knew that was tender,  
something I loved that was brave,  
If in my singing I shewed songs that I  
heard on my road,  
Were they not debts that I owed,  
rather than gifts that I gave?

If certain hours on their climb up the  
long ladder of time  
Turned my confusion to rhyme, drove  
me to dare an attempt,  
If by fair chance I might seem some-  
times abreast of my theme,  
Was I translating a dream? Was it a  
dream that you dreamt?

High and miraculous skies bless and  
astonish my eyes ;

All my dead secrets arise, all my dead  
stories come true.

Here is the Gate to the Sea. Once you  
unlocked it for me ;

Now, since you gave me the key, shall  
I unlock it for you ?

## WORDS

OH words, oh words, and shall you  
rule  
The world? What is it but the  
tongue  
That doth proclaim a man a fool,  
So that his best songs go unsung,  
So that his dreams are sent to school  
And all die young.

There pass the trav'ling dreams, and  
these  
My soul adores—my words condemn—  
Oh, I would fall upon my knees  
To kiss their golden garments' hem,  
Yet words do lie in wait to seize  
And murder them.

To-night the swinging stars shall  
plumb

The silence of the sky. And herds  
Of plumèd winds like huntsmen come  
To hunt with dreams the restless birds.

To-night the moon shall strike you  
dumb,

Oh words, oh words. . . .

## REDNECK'S SONG

THESE thirty years  
Old men have filled my ears  
With middle-aged ideas  
That never have been young,  
They made me wise.  
I learnt to whitewash lies.  
I learnt to shut my eyes,  
And hold my tongue.

Damned Philistine.  
And was it then so fine  
To learn to draw the line.  
(Is there a line to draw?)  
And must I then  
For threescore years and ten  
Worship the laws of men  
Who worshipped law?

Those laws are dust  
To-day, and yet I must  
Be faithful still, and trust  
In what dead men did prove,  
Magic may kill  
Their wisdom and their will,  
Yet I must follow still  
Their path . . . my groove. . . .

## TO THE UNBORN

Oh, bend your eyes, nor send your  
glance about.

Oh, watch your feet, nor stray beyond  
the kerb.

Oh, bind your heart lest it find secrets  
out.

For thus no punishment  
Of magic shall disturb  
Your very great content.

Oh, shut your lips to words that are  
forbidden.

Oh, throw away your sword, nor think  
to fight.

Seek not the best, the best is better  
hidden.

Thus need you have no fear,  
No terrible delight  
Shall cross your path, my dear.

Call no man foe, but never love a  
stranger.

Build up no plan, nor any star pursue.  
Go forth with crowds; in loneliness is  
danger.

Thus nothing God can send,  
And nothing God can do  
Shall pierce your peace, my friend.



## THE NEWER ZION

WHEN I achieve the chestnut joke of  
dying,  
When I slip through that Gate at  
Kensal Green,  
Shall I go spoil the fantasy by  
prying  
Behind the staging of this darling  
scene?

Shall I — a cast-off puppet — seek to  
study  
The Showman who manipulates the  
strings,  
The Hand that paints the western  
drop-scene ruddy,  
The prosy truths of all these faery  
things?

Shall I — self-conscious by a glassy  
ocean —

Stammer strange songs amid an alien  
host?

Or shall I not, refusing such promo-  
tion,

Bequeath to London my contented  
ghost?

I will come back to my Eternal  
City;

Her fogs once more my countenance  
shall dim;

I will enliven your austere com-  
mittee

With gossip gleaned among the  
cherubim.

By day I'll tread again the sounding  
mazes,

By night I'll track the moths about  
the Park;

My feet shall fall among the dusky  
daisies,  
Nor break nor bruise a petal in the  
dark.

I will repeat old inexpensive orgies ;  
Drink nectar at the bun-shop in Shore-  
ditch,  
Or call for Nut-Ambrosia at St.  
George's.  
And with a ghost-tip make the waitress  
rich.

My soundless feet shall fly among the  
runners  
Through the red thunders of a  
Zeppelin raid,  
My still voice cheer the Anti-Aircraft  
gunners,  
The fires shall glare — but I shall  
cast no shade.

And if a Shadow, wading in the  
 torrent  
 Of high excitement, snatch me from  
 the riot —  
 (Fool that he is) — and fumble with  
 his warrant,  
 And hail a hearse, and beg me to  
 “Go quiet.”

Mocking I'll go, and he shall be postil-  
 lion,  
 Until we reach the Keeper of the  
 Door:  
 “Hm . . . Benson . . . Stella . . .  
 militant civilian . . .  
 There's some mistake, we've had this  
 soul before. . . .”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ah, none shall keep my soul from this  
 its Zion;

Lost in the spaces I shall hear and  
    bless

The splendid voice of London, like a  
    lion

Calling its lover in the wilderness.

## TWO WOMEN SING

### FIRST WOMAN

OH woman — woman — woman, —  
Shall I to woman be a friend?  
I deal with man, and when I can  
Reclaim with interest all I lend.  
Who but a witless gambler plays  
For farthing stakes these golden days?  
No, woman — woman — woman —  
Must only play the game that pays.

### SECOND WOMAN

Oh woman — woman — woman, —  
To-morrow woman shall awake.  
She shall arise, and realise  
The goodly value of her stake.

And she shall lend her loan, and claim  
Her rightful interest on the same.

So woman — woman — woman —  
Shall learn at last the paying game.

## THE WOMAN ALONE

My eyes are girt with outer mists ;  
My ears sing shrill, and this I bless ;  
My finger-nails do bite my fists  
In ecstasy of loneliness.  
This I intend, and this I want,  
That — passing — you may only mark  
A dumb soul with its confidant  
Entombed together in the dark.

The hoarse church-bells of London  
ring ;  
The hoarser horns of London croak ;  
The poor brown lives of London cling  
About the poor brown streets like  
smoke ;  
The deep air stands above my roof  
Like water, to the floating stars.



My Friend and I — we sit aloof,  
We sit and smile, and bind our scars.

For you may wound and you may kill—  
It's such a little thing to die —  
Your cruel God may work his will,  
We do not care, my Friend and I.  
Though, at the gate of Paradise,  
Peter the Saint withhold his keys,  
My Friend and I — we have no eyes  
For Heav'n or Hell — or dreams like  
these. . . .

## THE INEVITABLE

*There is a sword, a fatal blade,  
Unthwarted, subtle as the air,  
And I could meet it unafraid  
If I might only meet it fair.  
Yet how I wonder why the Smith  
Who wrought that steel of subtle grain  
Should also be contented with  
So blunt and mean a thing as pain.*

The stars and fire-flies dance in rings.  
The fire-flies set my heart alight,  
Like fingers, writing magic things  
In flame, upon the wall of night.  
There is high meaning in the skies —  
(The stars and fire-flies — high and  
    low —)  
And all the spangled world is wise  
With knowledge that I almost know.

To-morrow I will don my cloak  
Of opal-grey, and I will stand  
Where the palm-shadows stride like  
    smoke

Across the dazzle of the sand.

To-morrow I will throw this blind  
Blind whiteness from my soul away,  
And pluck this blackness from my  
    mind,

And only leave the medium — grey.

To-morrow I will cry for gains

Upon the blue and brazen sky.

The precious venom in my veins

To-morrow will be parched and dry.

To-morrow it shall be my goal

To throw myself away from me,

To lose the outline of my soul

Against the greyness of the sea.

## THE DOG TUPMAN

Oh little friend of half my days,  
My little friend, who followed me  
Along those crooked sullen ways  
That only you had eyes to see.

You felt the same. You understood  
You too, defensive and morose,  
Encloaked your secret puppyhood —  
Your secret heart — and hid them close.

For I alone have seen you serve,  
Disciple of those early springs,  
With ears awry and tail a-curve  
You lost yourself in puppy things.

And you saw me. You bore in mind  
The clean and sunny things I felt

When, throwing hate along the wind,  
I flashed the lantern at my belt.

The moment passed, and we returned  
To barren words and old cold truth,  
Yet in our hearts our lanterns burned,  
We two had seen each other's youth.

When filthy pain did wrap me round  
Your upright ears I always saw,  
And on my outflung hand I found  
The blessing of your horny paw ;

And yet — oh impotence of men —  
My paw, more soft but not more wise,  
Old friend, was lacking to you when  
You looked your crisis in the eyes. . . .

You shared my youth, oh faithful  
friend,  
You let me share your puppyhood ;  
So, if I failed you in the end,  
My friend, my friend, you understood.

## SAINT BRIDE

ABOUT your brow a starry wreath,  
About your feet a wilderness,  
Where young hot hopes grow cold  
    beneath  
The tangled bondage of the press.  
Set like a saint within a niche —  
A strait and narrow niche — you hide,  
And weave a veil about you, which  
Can turn our steel, Saint Bride, Saint  
    Bride.

The eyes of coarse and pond'rous man  
Are sceptic and satirical.  
*“What, little saint, and still you scan  
Old heaven for that miracle?”*  
Oh heart deceived, yet harmèd not,

Child-widow of a truth that died,  
Bearer in mind of things forgot,  
Bride of a dream, Saint Bride, Saint  
Bride.

About you and about you thunders  
The wise young public on its 'bus,  
Exploding all your faery blunders,  
Explaining neatly — "*Thus and thus  
Hath science banished heaven now,  
And see — your Groom is crucified —*"  
On heaven's breast you lean your brow  
And laugh, and love — Saint Bride,  
Saint Bride.

## THE SLAVE OF GOD

THE finest fruit God ever made  
Hangs from the Tree of Heaven blue.  
It hangs above the steel sea blade  
That cuts the world's great globe in  
two.

The keenest eye that ever saw  
Stares out of Heaven into mine,  
Spins out my heart, and seems to  
draw  
My soul's elastic very fine.

The greatest beacon ever fired  
Stands up on Heaven's Hill to show  
The limit of the thing desired,  
Beyond which man may never go.

\* \* \* \* \*



THE SLAVE OF GOD 45

At midnight, when the night did  
dance  
Along the hours that led to  
morning,  
I saw a little boat advance  
Towards the great moon's beacon  
warning.

(The moon, God's Slave, who  
lights her torch,  
Lest men should slip between the  
bars,  
And run aground on Heav'n, and  
scorch  
To death upon a bank of stars.)

The little boat, on leaning keel,  
Sang up the mountains of the sea,  
Bearing a man who hoped to steal  
God's Slave from out eternity.

*"My love, I see you through my tears.  
No pity in your face I see.*

*I have sailed far across the years :  
Stretch out, stretch out your arms to me.*

*“ My love, I have an island seen,  
So shadowed, God’s most piercing star  
Shall never see where we have been,  
Shall never whisper where we are.*

*“ There we will wander, you and I,  
Down guilty and delightful ways,  
While palm-trees plait their fingers  
high  
Against your God’s enormous gaze.*

*“ For oh — the joy of two and two  
Your Paradise shall never see,  
The ecstasy of me and you,  
The white delight of you and me.*

*“ I know the penalty — the clutch  
Of God’s great rocks upon my keel.  
Drowned in the ocean of Too Much —  
So ends your thief — yet let me steal. . . .”*

The Slave of God she froze her  
face,  
The Slave of God she paid no need,  
And, thund'ring down high  
Heaven's space,  
Loud angels mocked the sailor's  
greed.

The diamond sun arose, and tossed  
A billion gems across the sea.  
*"The Slave of God is lost, is lost,  
The Slave of God is lost to me. . . ."*

He grounded on the common  
beach,  
He trod the little towns of men,  
And God removèd from his reach  
The cup of Heaven's passion then,  
And gave him vulgar love and  
speech,  
And gave him threescore years  
and ten.

## TRUE PROMISES

YOU promised War and Thunder and  
Romance.

You promised true, but we were very  
blind

And very young, and in our ignorance  
We never called to mind  
That truth is seldom kind.

You promised love, immortal as a  
star.

You promised true, yet how the truth  
can lie!

For now we grope for hands where no  
hands are,

And, deathless, still we cry,  
Nor hope for a reply.

You promised harvest and a perfect  
yield.

You promised true, for on the harvest  
morn,

Behold a reaper strode across the  
field,

And man of woman born

Was gathered in as corn.

You promised honour and ordeal by  
flame.

You promised true. In joy we  
trembled lest

We should be found unworthy when  
it came ;

But — oh — we never guessed

The fury of the test !

You promised friends and songs and  
festivals.

You promised true. Our friends, who  
still are young,

Assemble for their feasting in those  
halls

Where speaks no human tongue.

And thus our songs are sung.

## THE CORNISHMAN

At sunset, when the high sea span  
About the rocks a web of foam,  
I saw the ghost of a Cornishman  
Come home.

I saw the ghost of a Cornishman  
Run from the weariness of war,  
I heard him laughing as he ran  
Across his unforgotten shore.  
The great cliff, gilded by the west,  
Received him as an honoured guest.  
The green sea, shining in the bay,  
Did drown his dreadful yesterday.

Come home, come home, you million  
ghosts,  
The honest years shall make amends,  
The sun and moon shall be your hosts,  
The everlasting hills your friends.

And some shall seek their mothers'  
faces,

And some shall run to trysting places,

And some to towns, and other yet

Shall find great forests in their debt.

Oh, I would siege the golden coasts

Of space, and climb high heaven's

dome,

So I might see those million

ghosts

Come home.



## FIVE SMOOTH STONES

IT was young David, lord of sheep and  
cattle,  
Pursued his fate, the April fields  
among,  
Singing a song of solitary battle,  
A loud mad song, for he was very  
young.

Vivid the air — and something more  
than vivid, —  
Tall clouds were in the sky — and  
something more, —  
The light horizon of the spring was  
livid  
With a steel smile that showed the  
teeth of war.

54 FIVE SMOOTH STONES

It was young David mocked the  
Philistine.

It was young David laughed beside the  
river.

There came his mother — his and yours  
and mine —

With five smooth stones, and dropped  
them in his quiver.

You never saw so green-and-gold a  
fairy.

You never saw such very April  
eyes.

She sang him sorrow's song to make  
him wary,

She gave him five smooth stones to  
make him wise.

*The first stone is love, and that shall  
fail you.*

*The second stone is hate, and that shall  
fail you.*

FIVE SMOOTH STONES 55

*The third stone is knowledge, and that shall fail you.*

*The fourth stone is prayer, and that shall fail you.*

*The fifth stone shall not fail you.*

For what is love, O lovers of my  
tribe?

And what is love, O women of my  
day?

Love is a farthing piece, a bloody  
bribe

Pressed in the palm of God — and  
thrown away.

And what is hate, O fierce and unfor-  
giving?

And what shall hate achieve, when all  
is said?

A silly joke that cannot reach the  
living,

A spitting in the faces of the dead.

56 FIVE SMOOTH STONES

And what is knowledge, O young men  
who tasted

The reddest fruit on that forbidden  
tree?

Knowledge is but a painful effort  
wasted,

A bitter drowning in a bitter sea.

And what is prayer, O waiters for the  
answer?

And what is prayer, O seekers of the  
cause?

Prayer is the weary soul of Herod's  
dancer,

Dancing before blind kings without  
applause.

The fifth stone is a magic stone, my  
David,

Made up of fear and failure, lies and  
loss.

Its heart is lead, and on its face is  
gravèd

A crookèd cross, my son, a crookèd  
cross.

It has no dignity to lend it value ;

No purity — alas, it bears a stain.

You shall not give it gratitude, nor  
shall you

Recall it all your days, except with  
pain.

Oh, bless your blindness, glory in your  
groping !

Mock at your betters with an upward  
chin !

And when the moment has gone by  
for hoping,

Sling your fifth stone, O son of mine,  
and win.

Grief do I give you, grief and dreadful  
laughter ;

58 FIVE SMOOTH STONES

Sackcloth for banner, ashes in your  
wine.

Go forth, go forth, nor ask me what  
comes after ;

The fifth stone shall not fail you, son  
of mine.

GO FORTH, GO FORTH, AND SLAY THE  
PHILISTINE.

## NEW YEAR, 1918

A SONG I never heard  
I must rehearse,  
Counting each hour a word,  
Counting each day a verse.  
Not of my proper choice  
Raise I my voice,  
While others — fierce and strong —  
Raise theirs to drown my song.

Must I then sing aloud,  
Faint as a bird,  
And, like a bird, be proud  
To sing — to sing unheard?  
Weary and very weak,  
Shall I then seek  
A hearing, idiot-wise,  
From the unhearing skies?

Drowning my whispered dreams,  
Great voices cry.  
They sing their songs, it seems,  
With better heart than I.  
Hush — I can hear Death sing —  
*“Here is my sting.”*  
And the Grave echo — *“See,  
Here is my victory.”*

To-night the heavens bend  
A little nearer.  
The singer is my friend,  
And I — at last — the hearer.  
No more to sing alone  
A song unknown, —  
Hush — very tense and thin,  
The dawn-like notes begin.

THE END



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